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Children's Services

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Participants

Ministry of Children's Services

Joni Brodziak, Acting Assistant Deputy Minister, Indigenous Partnerships and Strategic Services

Michelle Craig, Assistant Deputy Minister, Early Childhood Services

Jon Reeves, Assistant Deputy Minister, Transition and Intervention Supports

Leann Wagner, Assistant Deputy Minister, Child Intervention

Sherri Wilson, Deputy Minister

8 a.m.

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[Ms Phillips in the chair]

The Chair: Good morning, everyone. I'm going to begin this meeting now. I'm just waiting for my camera to come on here in Teams.

My name is Shannon Phillips. I'm the chair of this committee. This is the Standing Committee on Public Accounts. Just to let all the members know, I will now be simply reading the members' names into the record. We'll begin the meeting right away. We have the Ministry of Children's Services with us this morning.

Just before we do that, then, we'll also just note for the record that we have Auditor General staff via videoconference this morning. We have Doug Wylie joining us, and if there are any other Auditor General staff, please just introduce yourself before you speak.

From the Legislative Assembly Office we have Michael Kulicki and Aaron Roth in the room.

For hon. members, we have Member Guthrie, who's the deputy chair of this committee, who is in the room, and then we have Member Lovely, Member Neudorf, Member Armstrong-Homeniuk, and Member Walker from the government caucus. From the opposition caucus we have Member Pancholi and Member Renaud, with Member Schmidt in the room.

We have a number of officials from the Ministry of Children's Services. I'll just ask them to say their name and position before they speak the first time. Then, if you are providing any other answers over the course of the meeting, just simply say your name for *Hansard's* benefit.

We have a number of protocols, that we are all aware of, from the chief medical officer of health in terms of our social distancing in the room. Ensure your microphones are muted for those of you who are even more distanced than the requisite six feet apart, and unmute when you are recognized to speak, with the exception of points of order, when members may simply just begin speaking if they are via videoconference.

Committee proceedings are live streamed on the Internet and broadcast on Alberta Assembly TV, and the audio- and videostream and transcripts of meetings are accessed via the LAO website.

We have our agenda in front of us, friends. Are there any changes to the agenda? Seeing none, I'll call for a motion that the agenda for today's meeting be approved as distributed.

Mr. Singh: I will move the motion.

The Chair: Thank you, Member Singh. I will note for the record that Member Singh is present today as well.

Is there any discussion on this motion? All in favour? Any opposed? Thank you. That motion is carried.

I will also note for the record that Member Turton has joined the meeting as well.

We have our minutes from the May 4 meeting in front of us. Do members have any errors or omissions to note? I will ask for a motion that the minutes of the May 4 meeting of our standing committee be approved as distributed.

Mr. Neudorf: So moved.

The Chair: Thank you. That was Member Neudorf.

Is there any discussion on this motion? All in favour? Any opposed? Thank you. That motion is carried.

We will now move on to the Ministry of Children's Services. I'd like to welcome our guests, who are here to address the office of the Auditor General's outstanding recommendations as well as the

ministry's annual report for 2019-20. I will now invite officials from the ministry to provide opening remarks not exceeding 10 minutes.

Ms Wilson: Thank you, Chair. Good morning. I'm Sherri Wilson. I'm the Deputy Minister of Children's Services. Before I begin, I would like to start by acknowledging that we are on Treaty 6 territory, and I would also like to recognize the Métis people of Alberta, who share a deep connection with this land.

I'm pleased to be here representing the Ministry of Children's Services and to speak about our work in the '19-20 fiscal year. Joining me are Joni Brodziak, former acting assistant deputy minister for the indigenous partnerships and strategic services division; Michelle Craig, assistant deputy minister for the early childhood services division; Jon Reeves, assistant deputy minister for the transition and intervention supports services division; Leann Wagner, assistant deputy minister for the child intervention division; Susan Dubetz, director of finance; and Mark Hattori, executive lead. I would like to acknowledge the work of former Deputy Minister Darlene Bouwsema, who retired from her outstanding career in public service in late 2020.

The Ministry of Children's Services provides a wide range of programs, services, and supports for children, youth, and families. This includes programs and services available to all Albertans like regulated child care, the more targeted prevention and early intervention programs and services as well as supports for children and youth at risk through child intervention services.

Our focus continues to be on strengthening the work we do to meet the demands of our growing population and to focus on our top priority, the safety and well-being of children, youth, and families in Alberta. In fiscal year '19-20 Children's Services worked to strengthen programs and target spending to focus more on Albertans in need. This approach allowed us to have a bigger impact, supporting those who need the help while also being responsible with taxpayer dollars. We also took steps to make it easier to access our programs and services and to ensure they are consistent across the province, because we believe Albertans should have access to the supports and services they need no matter where they live.

A significant area of focus for the ministry is supporting high-quality, safe, accessible, and affordable child care. In fiscal '19-20 we took steps and began transforming the child care system into a streamlined system that offers all parents high-quality, accessible, and safe child care choices, with supports for those most in need. We committed to launching the first child care consultation in over a decade and to reviewing child care legislation to focus on quality and safety in child care while removing red tape.

Children's Services also committed to renegotiating the bilateral agreement with the federal government so that investments in child care affordability would help those who need it most through an enhanced subsidy model, allowing parents to access safe, high-quality child care, helping them to get back to work and grow the economy. Over the course of the '19-20 year Children's Services saw a 5 per cent increase in the number of licensed and approved child care spaces. This exceeded the target set for the fiscal year of a 4 per cent increase and works out to approximately 6,743 more spaces than in the 2018-19 year.

Another way that we targeted government support was by beginning the work to streamline the Alberta child benefit and the Alberta family employment tax credit into the new Alberta child and family benefit. Consolidating these two programs would provide more support to those most in need, be more efficient and easier for Albertans.

In 2019 the Alberta government also committed to consolidating all prevention and early intervention grants into family resource

network grants. Under the previous system services were put into place region by region, without a provincial strategy or funding model. This created inconsistency for delivery, performance, and desired outcomes. Parent link centres only provided services for families with children up to age six, after which families would have to find other programs to meet their needs. New family resource networks help fill gaps in the system, provide consistency across the province, and make it easier for families to find the support they need. They also ensure programs are aligned with the well-being and resiliency framework, improve consistency among age groups and regions, and use taxpayer dollars more responsibly.

Most importantly, with a co-ordinated and targeted approach, children, youth, and families would benefit in terms of service delivery and outcomes. When risk factors for vulnerabilities are identified early, targeted supports help reduce the need for more intrusive and intensive interventions later on. With wraparound supports for at-risk families, children can build the best possible foundation in their early years, youth transitioning to adulthood will have the resources they need, and parents and caregivers will be supported to raise their families.

Every child deserves a nurturing and supportive home. When there is a need for more intervention, our ministry provides services and supports to maintain the safety and well-being of children. Whenever possible we work to keep the child in the home and connected to family, community, and culture. When a child's safety is compromised, they are removed from their home and placed in a safe environment. This step is taken only when it is no longer safe for them to be in their home and all other, less intrusive measures have been explored.

We work to support extended family to care for the child through a kinship care arrangement, which helps reduce trauma and preserve the child's connection to family, culture, and community. Kinship care respects the importance of prior relationships between the child, caregiver, and community as well as the child's biological family. Kinship care also supports cultural connections, which is why it is our primary option in these cases. The more connection a child has to where they live and the people in their lives, the better their lifelong outcomes will be.

We are also grateful for the many foster caregivers in our province, who provide safe, loving, temporary homes to children and youth in need. Children's Services works hard to provide kinship and foster caregivers the support, training, and resources they need to provide temporary, safe, nurturing environments for infants, children, and families.

8:10

Our ministry recognizes the potential of all youth and works to help them overcome challenges, reach their goals, and achieve successes. For youth transitioning out of care, moving into adulthood can be challenging. Many have experienced trauma, disconnection from family and community, cultural isolation, and other challenges unique to each individual.

We have focused efforts to ensure that youth have financial, social, and emotional supports in place to successfully transition to adulthood. This includes support through the support and financial assistance program as well as the advancing futures program, which provides funding for postsecondary education to support young people who have been in care or received supports from Children's Services. Advancing futures is the only program of its kind in Canada that provides funding along with emotional and social supports. In fiscal year '19-20 advancing futures approved 883 students to receive a bursary. Children's Services invested \$12.1 million into advancing futures to support those 883 youth participating in the program.

I mentioned that our work has been focused on strengthening our programs and finding ways to be more effective with our spending. This also relates to the government of Alberta's mandate to reduce red tape across government and make it easier for Albertans to access the programs and the services that they need. I'm pleased to say that in '19-20 Children's Services reduced regulatory requirements by 8.2 per cent in support of the government's overall mandate to reduce red tape.

We accomplished this in a few ways. For example, the ministry launched several new online systems to help reduce paperwork and streamline government processes while improving outcomes for Albertans. The new online child care subsidy application replaces the old paper submission process, which would typically see about 95,000 paper submissions and documents per year. Parents can now easily and securely check to see if they are eligible and apply for a child care subsidy online. This allows subsidy staff to focus on other work such as audits, training, ongoing improvements.

We also expanded case connect, a new mobile application that allows secure, real-time capture of information for child intervention caseworkers to better inform decision-making. It improves efficiencies by removing travel time, eliminates the need to transcribe handwritten notes, reduces duplication of work, and frees up more of the caseworkers' time to work directly with families.

Of course, we all know how much has changed from the end of the 2019-20 year, when the pandemic was just in its early days. When COVID first arrived in Alberta, Children's Services took immediate action to help prevent the spread of the virus and keep Albertans as safe as possible. In March 2020 Children's Services worked with the Ministry of Health and Alberta Health Services to open almost 3,400 essential services child care spaces in eight communities across Alberta.

We also modified our service delivery across the ministry to help keep staff and clients safe while continuing to provide supports and services for children and families. This included maintaining emergency and critical services 24 hours a day, seven days a week, developing modified practice guidelines for group homes for children and youth in care, working with kinship and foster caregivers to ensure that they had what they need . . .

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy. I'm sure we'll get back to it.

We'll now turn things over to the Auditor General for five minutes of opening remarks. Mr. Wylie or one of his assistants, please go ahead.

Mr. Wylie: Doug Wylie here. Chair, I'll just take a couple of minutes and touch on some of our work at this ministry. First, on the financial side, we do audit transactions that relate to our audit opinion on the consolidated financial statements of the province, and the results of that work are recorded in the context of our consolidated financial statements. I'll highlight the recommendations from our performance audit work at the ministry. The first relates to a recommendation that was originally made in 2014 and repeated again in 2020, and it relates to access control processes related to IT systems. Really, we just recommended that the department improve the access control processes for its information systems to ensure that user access to the application systems and data are properly authorized and accessed properly when the employees leave their employment or if they change roles.

Three other outstanding recommendations relate to a performance audit we did back in 2016. That was a performance audit dealing with the systems that are used to deliver services to indigenous children and families. Our first recommendation and the findings are included on page 13 of our 2016 report. In summary,

we found that there was a lack of clear, co-ordinated processes regarding the funding of early support services for indigenous children and families. We made one recommendation to the department, that they include the needs of indigenous children and families in the design and delivery of the early support services and that the department report publicly regularly on the effectiveness of its early support services.

The second recommendation is included on page 17 of our 2016 report. Our findings there were that the compliance results for indigenous children receiving services were less favourable than for nonindigenous children. Just as an example, indigenous children in Alberta receiving services from the regional offices experienced less frequent caseworker contact and less frequent review of their care plans than nonindigenous children and that the results and reporting specific to indigenous children receiving services was limited.

Our third area and findings and recommendations are included on pages 24 and 25 of the 2016 report. Our findings there really were that the department had not provided guidance to staff to clarify its expectations for providing culturally appropriate services. The department had not provided sufficient training in intercultural understanding, and it had not widely adopted or supported identified best practices within regions and DFNAs.

I am happy to report that the departments indicated they implemented all three of these recommendations, and we are currently in the process of following up on those, and we hope to be able to report to the Assembly in early fall.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you.

We'll now turn to our questioning round. We will begin with the Official Opposition. Official Opposition, your time begins when you begin speaking.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you very much, Madam Chair, and thank you, Deputy Minister, for being here today and for all the ministry staff who are joining us. I'm just going to apologize off the start. If I do end up interrupting you at any point, it's only because we have short time limits. I apologize if that feels rude; it doesn't mean to be rude.

I'd like to begin with page 56 of the annual report, which goes over the revenue and expense highlights for the ministry. According to the expenses listed on page 56, there are a number of areas within the Children's Services budget where significantly less was spent in that year, in 2019-20, than was budgeted for, for example, \$6.9 million less on early intervention services, \$5.3 million less on child intervention, \$15 million less on child care, and \$3.3 million less on policy innovation and indigenous connections. The annual report indicates that most of that is due to a reduction in discretionary grants.

It appears, Deputy, that these are a result of an in-year saving exercise, which we understand all ministries were undergoing during 2019-20. Can you describe what your ministry's overall target was for in-year savings and whether or not you hit that target in 2019-20?

Ms Wilson: You're asking about savings that we experienced over the course of the fiscal '19-20 year?

Ms Pancholi: That's correct.

8:20

Ms Wilson: There was no formal set target for in-year budget adjustment. However, adjustments were put in place in areas where either a surplus or funding needs were forecasted. The total budget adjustment for the '19-20 year was approximately \$26.5 million.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. I'm wondering. Could you commit to tabling a list of each of the cuts or grants that were cut in

the 2019-20 year and the dollar amount, with details of description of what the grant was?

Ms Wilson: I can certainly provide you with a breakdown of the \$26 million now, by program area, if you would like.

Ms Pancholi: I would actually prefer, if you don't mind, if you could table that information if possible, just in the interest of time, and I may ask you about a few specific ones.

Ms Wilson: We can certainly provide that breakdown by program area.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I appreciate that, Deputy.

One of the areas that I'm wondering – you can clarify whether or not this was one of the specific areas that was cut during 2019-20 – is with respect to the supports and financial assistance agreement supports for young people transitioning out of government care into adulthood. We understand that October 31, 2019, was when it was first learned that the supports and financial assistance agreement eligibility age would be lowered from 24 to 22. This relates to line 2.2, I believe, of the 2019 budget, and this was going to result in approximately 500 young people no longer being eligible for supports under the SFAA program. I'll call it SFAA just for the interest of brevity. I'm wondering. Can you clarify whether or not the change in eligibility for the SFAA program, from 24 to 22 – was this part in your savings exercise that the ministry underwent?

Ms Wilson: The budget adjustments in line 2.2 – just give me a second here, sorry; just going through my documents – actually related to savings realized from a decrease in child-protection caseloads and transferring of children into the foster and kinship care programs. The SFAA program did not actually end in '19-20, and youth continue to be supported.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. But the decision was made in the 2019-20 year to lower the eligibility age. I'm just wondering if you can let us know: how much was the ministry anticipating to save as a result of lowering the eligibility age for the SFAA program?

Ms Wilson: I don't have that information with me.

Ms Pancholi: Can you commit to tabling that information?

Ms Wilson: I can certainly follow up with the information that's appropriate to share.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. With respect to this change, which again was made in the 2019-20 year and relates to the overall budget of child intervention in line 2 of the budget, the minister indicated that to make that decision about lowering the eligibility, it was because there were other supports that these young people transitioning out of government care would be eligible for. What other government programs did the ministry determine that these specific young people were eligible for, and was a review done of each of these young people who'd be affected by the change to determine specifically which other government supports they would be eligible for?

Ms Wilson: To answer your question in regard to what other programs exist, I can share that we certainly work very closely with Community and Social Services, and, in fact, we have a joint protocol agreement with them to ensure that we have supports in place to better support youth with disabilities transitioning to adult services. It allows information sharing between crossministry programs and informs joint case planning and service co-ordination.

We also have the advancing futures program, which provides educational supports, not just financial educational supports but also social and emotional supports, for individuals, young adults who are choosing to pursue postsecondary education. We also work with youth to ensure that, again, we work with crossministry partners to identify what individual needs each young adult has, whether it's housing, education, employment, and certainly connect them appropriately to help them transition.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. My question, though, was for the young people who would be affected, the 500 young people who would be affected. Was an analysis or a review done of each of their specific circumstances to determine what other government supports there are within Children's Services or within other ministries that they would be eligible for?

Ms Wilson: Staff would work with each individual youth to ensure that they were connected with the appropriate services to their needs.

Ms Pancholi: So analysis was done for each young person affected by the change?

Ms Wilson: Our caseworkers would work with each individual youth to ensure that they're connected appropriately.

Ms Pancholi: Was any formal review done that you can table with this committee?

Ms Wilson: A formal review?

Ms Pancholi: Of each individual young person's file.

Ms Wilson: I would say that case information for each individual is personal information and would not be something that could be tabled at this committee, but I could certainly endeavour to look at information that could be appropriately shared.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I appreciate that.

You mentioned that you worked with the Ministry of Community and Social Services. You mentioned a joint protocol agreement, but that's, as you indicated, for young people who have disabilities, which would not capture all the young people who are part of the SFAA program. They wouldn't necessarily fall into that category. Was formal consultation done with the Ministry of Community and Social Services, the Ministry of Labour and Immigration, and the Ministry of Advanced Education before the decision was made to lower the eligibility for the SFAA program?

Ms Wilson: We would work with all of our crossministry partners to identify programs that would be appropriate to connect our youth to to ensure that they have the services they need. I don't have the list of specific ministries that we would have worked with at the time, but I can certainly provide that as follow-up.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. Any records of that consultation which you can share, of course, subject to FOIP and everything, if you can share that – that would be appreciated, if you would table that with this committee.

I'd also like to know whether or not – as you may be aware, in November of 2019, in the fiscal year we're discussing today, the office of the Child and Youth Advocate released a report titled A Critical Time, a special report on young adults leaving government care, which recommended continuing to provide supports to young people on the SFAA program up to the age of 24. Did the ministry

consult with the Child and Youth Advocate in its decision to lower the eligibility age for SFAA?

Ms Wilson: I'm going to ask ADM Reeves if he can respond to that question and provide further detail.

Mr. Reeves: Thank you for that question. We consulted with the advocate on a case-by-case basis, but we did not implement those pieces because the age wasn't reduced in the '19-20 fiscal year.

Ms Pancholi: Certainly, it didn't take effect in the '19-20 fiscal year, but the decision was clearly made in that '19-20 fiscal year. That was the time when the minister announced that it was going to happen, in October of 2019. So was a decision to lower the age of the SFAA program – no consultation was done with the office of the Child and Youth Advocate before that decision was made?

Ms Wilson: What I will suggest is that in addition to the list of ministries that we provide, we will also confirm that information as well.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy. Given that the current eligibility age at the time, 24, was based on a significant amount of research showing how the transition period for young people emerging into adulthood raises significant challenges given their backgrounds and history – that was done on the basis of research and evidence – can you table with us or can you talk to us a little bit and then table any evidence and research done for lowering the age of the eligibility of the SFAA program which resulted in that decision?

Ms Wilson: Certainly, I will endeavour once again to provide analysis that is appropriate to share. We provide advice in informing those decisions and will endeavour to share what is appropriate.

Ms Pancholi: So was any cost-benefit analysis done about what the long-term or short-term cost implications of lowering the age of eligibility for SFAA – was that done at all before the decision?

Ms Wilson: I'm going to ask ADM Reeves if he can provide detail to that question.

Mr. Reeves: We looked at some of the jurisdictional research across Canada when we did our analysis, and those jurisdictions have a variety of different age group cut-offs.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you. I mean, thank you. I appreciate that. However, I'm also able to do a quick scan across the country to see what the programs are in place for young people transitioning out of care. A crossjurisdictional analysis is not the same thing as doing a cost-benefit analysis for Alberta young people transitioning out of care to determine whether or not there were short- and long-term cost implications as well as, I guess, the impact on these young people who are vulnerable and transitioning out of care. Was that analysis done?

8:30

Ms Wilson: I will emphasize that each individual, unique case – we certainly support every youth in accessing the programs that are important for them to succeed in transitioning into adulthood, whether they're part of SFAA or accessing services through different government or community needs.

Your question about the cost-analysis component of it: again, I think that, as ADM Reeves has pointed out, we did some crossjurisdictional analysis. You've asked for any tabling of

analysis that we can provide, and I think, again, we'll provide what can be appropriately shared.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I appreciate that there's individual work that's done with the young people who are transitioning out of care, but of course the decision to lower the eligibility age is a policy decision that implicates not just the children right now in the program but in the future as well, all young people transitioning out of care in the future who we maybe don't already have individual case files with. I am clarifying that I'd like to see any cost-benefit analysis that was done on that decision of the long-term implications for young people as a whole transitioning out of care.

I'm just going to move on . . .

Mr. Guthrie: Point of order – yeah – on 23(b). The member speaks to matters other than those under question here. Chair, we've been going on here for quite a while without a point of order. The question of who created a policy or why a policy was created or the details of the decision, you know, on the creation of that policy: those are not within the mandate requirements of this committee. Like, we're here to analyze existing policy or the effective implementation of directives, not the creation of those directives, so I would request that we shift the focus to those matters.

Thank you, Chair.

The Chair: Thank you. Deputy Chair, I think at this point I'm just going to clarify that this was a financial decision made in the 2019-2020 annual report period, so it's in scope. The member did indicate that she was about to move on, so let's not interrupt that. I will ensure that we have a little bit more clarity should these points of order continue to be called. I think at this point we will allow the member to continue with her questioning.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. On page 11, Deputy, of the annual report it indicates that supports were provided up until the age of 24 under the SFAA program as part of its COVID response, but I note that what's absent, Deputy, from this annual report is that the fact that the supports were continued to the age of 24 was actually because of the result of a court injunction that was granted in March 17, 2020, again, within the fiscal year in place. The reason why those programs or supports were continued, provided up to the age of 24 was actually not a result of the ministry's decision but because of a court injunction preventing the government from going forward with that change. Why was that not mentioned in the annual report?

Ms Wilson: Related to COVID specifically, well, we did allow youth that had a previous SFAA agreement to re-enter into an agreement if they needed those supports due to the pandemic. This . . .

Ms Pancholi: But, of course, you were – thank you, Deputy. What I guess my question is – you were actually prevented from removing those supports or prevented young people from accessing those supports up to the age of 24. You were prevented from doing that because of a court injunction, and I'm just wondering why that was omitted from the annual report.

Mr. Guthrie: Point of order, 23(b) once again. The member speaks to matters other than those under question. The member has stated now twice, asking questions of why something is not in the report. We are here to deal with what is actually in that report, not what is omitted from the report. I would ask that we stick to the content within the annual report for 2019-2020.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, Deputy Chair.

On this one I will now turn things over to the Official Opposition.

Mr. Schmidt: Well, Madam Chair, we know that the ministry undertakes a wide spectrum of activity over the year and that only a portion of it shows up in the annual report. It's well within the scope of this committee to question the deputy minister and department executives about the activities that the ministry has undertaken. Now, I appreciate that the members of the government caucus come here and ask the deputy minister to read them the annual report. We have questions that we want to get answers to about the activities that the ministry has undertaken, and I think my friend has the right to ask those questions. Moreover, I think we repeatedly see the members of the government caucus raise these points of order not in an attempt to define the scope of the committee but to obstruct the work that we're trying to do. I would ask that you find that this isn't a point of order.

The Chair: All right. Thank you, hon. members.

I am concerned that there might be a little bit of crossthreading in terms of what is in order and what is not, so let me be clear about the lines of questioning that are in order. Broadly, it is within the scope of this committee to ask about any issues related to the outstanding recommendations of the AG; issues related to the government's annual report as a whole and how the ministry works to deliver on those central priorities; activities, spending, and allocation of resources within the time period covered by the annual report of the ministry and previous.

If the ministry chooses to table a report for our consideration that discusses spending or activities beyond the end of the fiscal year, then those questions related to that time period are also in order. Also, if any outstanding recommendations of the Auditor General or Auditor General reports writ large of particular departments move beyond the previous fiscal year, then those questions, too, are in order.

Any issues related to outcomes or measures contained in a ministry annual report are in order, also any changes for measures that are in an annual report or a previous annual report. For example, if you have performance outcomes or measures that were discussed in 2017 and then they are discussed again in '19-20 or are modified, that is in order, to ask why and how those performance outcomes, metrics, and expectations of the department have changed over time.

From that perspective, if members have questions as to why something is not included as a measure or outcome in an annual report, particularly if it has been measured in the past – certainly, within accounting principles, when we make changes to what we measure and what kinds of outcomes we measure, that is perfectly within order because it signals allocation of resources, which is the work of this committee. It is also within the scope of this committee to ask departments how they arrived at certain decisions in order to meet the outcomes that the Legislature and their ministers have set out for them and how they chose to allocate resources.

Finally, I will, as part of this ruling, note that it is the discretion of members to use their questioning time as they see fit. Now, if they feel the need to badger deputies or other officials with the same question over and over again, I'll likely intervene because that would be an unparliamentary practice. But if members want to spend an entire block of time, within the historical rules of the parliamentary system, you know, litigating one small issue, that is their prerogative, and that is in order.

That is, hopefully, a clarification on what is in scope and in order. I will refer the members to the practical guide that has been provided to members for our committee as well as what is laid out

in the Measuring Up report and others, in the government-wide annual report, as well as previous rulings of chairs and Speakers on what is in order. If there are substantive points of order to be made, of course they will be entertained.

With that, I do not find a point of order in this instance, and I'd like to invite the hon. member to continue.

8:40

Mr. Guthrie: I'm still not quite clear here. You went through a lot of information there. If you're calling this . . .

The Chair: I have made my ruling, hon. member.

Mr. Guthrie: . . . in order . . .

The Chair: I've made my ruling in terms of what is in scope, and I have indicated that, in particular, if there are changes to outcomes and what is measured in annual reports, that is precisely the work of this committee. Now, I won't be clarifying the ruling any longer, and I will not be entertaining an argument at this point. The scope of this committee is contained within the practical guide, and it is also contained within the language in the government-wide annual report, which is all open to members to discuss. There is also a historical right of members to have broad latitude to ask questions about how government policy was created in order to allocate resources – those two things are together – and how certain decisions were arrived at and how they are or are not reflecting allocation of resources and the outcomes that the government has set for itself. I think that is clear, and we are now moving on.

Mr. Guthrie: I'd like to call a point of order based on 65(2)(b) and appeal the decision of the chair to the committee.

The Chair: I will now look to the clerk for guidance on how to proceed with this.

At this point, I have to call the question that the ruling of the chair be sustained.
I will now call that question.

[The ruling of the chair was not sustained]

The Chair: I'm going to call on the hon. member the deputy chair to now clarify his point of order and put to the committee his point of order, please.

Mr. Guthrie: This is not a motion that is debatable. This motion is put forward, the members vote, and then we move on with the ruling that is provided.

The Chair: All right. We are going to move on with our line of questioning. I will now turn things over to the hon. member.

Mr. Guthrie: Can we clarify what happened, then, with the ruling?

The Chair: I will find that the hon. member should change her line of questioning such that she references a page number of the annual report.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Page . . .

The Chair: I just wanted to add that – hon. member, just one moment. I am going to rule at this point – sorry; my muting was taking a moment there – that in this one instance, in this line of questioning, the hon. member must reference an annual report page number.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Page 11 of the annual report indicates that supports were continued to be provided to young people up to the age of 24 as a result of the COVID response.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member. We will now turn things over to the government side.

Mr. Walker: Thank you, Chair. Good morning to all my colleagues here. Thank you to the officials from the Children's Services department for being here today as well as to the Auditor General, whose insights I always greatly enjoy and appreciate.

Through the chair, just to begin, I listened with great interest to the recent conversation with the deputy minister and Member Pancholi, and I was wondering if the deputy minister could provide a breakdown by program area of the \$26.5 million adjustment seen in her ministry and if she wouldn't mind sharing that with the committee now if possible.

Ms Wilson: I'm sorry. Can you just clarify?

Mr. Walker: Sure. Yeah. The \$26.5 million adjustment you had spoken of in the previous back and forth with Member Pancholi that you saw in your ministry, and if you'd mind sharing that now, breaking it down by program if possible.

Thank you.

Ms Wilson: Certainly. Thank you for the question. The \$26.5 million in-year adjustment is broken down as follows. In line 2, child intervention program, we saw an in-year savings of approximately \$18.7 million. In the child care program we saw an in-year savings of \$1.9 million, and in the early intervention services for children and youth program we saw an in-year savings of \$6.5 million.

Mr. Walker: Thank you very much for that breakdown. That's very informational and instructive.

My first focus here, thematically, will be on the advancing futures program, which is incredibly important to so many Albertans, including some of my own constituents, so I really want to get into the nuts and bolts of this program. Key objective 3.2, Deputy Minister, is stated to be to "support the successful transition for youth out of care into adulthood, focusing on educational attainment, career exploration and employment readiness." Now, from key objective 3.2 on page 39 the report outlines the advancing futures program, which, again, supports youth who have received services under the Child, Youth and Family Enhancement Act to access, of course, postsecondary opportunities and obtain a career, such an important focus.

My first question here. The report describes this program as being the only one of its kind in Canada. Now, given this, Deputy Minister, what sort of benchmarks and measures are used to ensure the program is operating as effectively as possible and that youth are receiving the support they need to succeed? Feel free to expand. I really enjoy the granular detail.

Ms Wilson: Thank you very much for the question. Advancing futures, as you mentioned, is the only program of its kind in Canada. It has a variety of processes in place to ensure that recipients are receiving the support they need to be successful. The program guidelines and practices are reviewed annually and amended as needed to respond to input and feedback from a variety of sources, including advancing futures recipients and young people in care, caseworkers, youth-serving agencies, and other stakeholders. Advancing futures also receives monthly updates from institutions. When recipients do not meet the institution's requirements, program co-ordinators with advancing futures meet with the youth to discuss their challenges and put in place supports to help them succeed.

In 2019 a social return on investment and economic impact assessment was completed to validate the program benefits. The report found that the advancing futures program had a social return on investment and economic impact assessment ratio of 1 to 4, meaning that every dollar spent on the advancing futures program generated about \$4 of social and economic benefit.

8:50

The report also found that the program produced additional social and economic benefits for participating youths, including a number of different things: increased skills and labour market participation; increased employability and higher earnings; improved parenting, time management, financial literacy, and other life skills; improved mental and physical health and well-being; improved social and emotional development; improved social equality and increased social capital; increased engagement in civic activities and volunteering; reduced participation in criminal activities as well as reduced reliance on government programs.

Mr. Walker: Thank you for that response, Deputy Minister. I just want to highlight in your response the fact – and I’m very pleased by this. It’s something that I strongly support with regard to the advancing futures program. I think that this should be applied across all programs, and that is the fact that your department is tracking, measuring, if you will, the social return of your program. I think that it is so important. While we’re always measuring economic returns and efficiencies, the social aspect is incredibly important, along with our youth, and I just want to have on *Hansard*, through the chair, that I strongly support that.

Now, continuing on with the advancing futures program, along this line of questioning as per page 39, Deputy Minister: how is the ministry assessing the transitional supports such as mentoring and coaching, that are highlighted, available to youth in this program?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for the question. The social return on investment and economic impact assessment completed in 2019 included the assessment of the transitional supports, which included mentoring and coaching. The report found that the mentoring and coaching provided to youth resulted in additional social and economic benefits, which I talked about in my previous answer.

In addition, each youth accessing advancing futures is assigned a program co-ordinator, who supports them through the initial application process to the completion of their planned postsecondary studies. In 2015 contact measures were introduced to confirm that minimum contact requirements are being met by each program co-ordinator. Caseloads are audited annually, and results are shared with the team. If a standard of 90 per cent is not achieved, a plan is put in place to ensure contact measures are being met. Advancing futures recipients are able to meet with a program co-ordinator in a number of different ways, whether face to face, telephone, e-mail, or Skype.

As a student’s circumstances change, the program co-ordinator works with the student to adjust their funding and transitional plan. Program co-ordinators support students to develop a plan to overcome challenges that they are facing. Program co-ordinators also have set times when they connect with youth on their caseloads. Although meetings are typically set for once a month, students have access to their program co-ordinators as they require. Generally, high-risk students enrolled in specialized high schools or upgrading programs may require more check-ins throughout the month whereas second-, third-, or fourth-year diploma and degree students may require fewer check-ins.

Mr. Walker: Thank you very much for that, Deputy Minister. What struck me was the 90 per cent metric, if you will, for

ensuring success in this program. I’m just wondering if you wanted to comment on how they came to setting that 90 per cent mark, which I think is a mark of excellence. Some people might comment that it’s quite high, but I think, especially when dealing with Children’s Services, that having a benchmark that high would be quite appropriate. If you’d care to comment, but if not, we can move on.

Ms Wilson: That’s information that I will have to provide later if that’s okay.

Mr. Walker: Yeah, that’s great. Thank you very much.

Now, sticking here with the advancing futures program, page 45, Deputy Minister, of the annual report, under performance measure 3(a), shows the “percentage of youth receiving supports from the Advancing Futures program who successfully completed their planned studies.” In 2019-2020 there is a 3 per cent increase in the actual percentage of youth receiving supports from the advancing futures program compared to the target. Now, how has the ministry used this indicator to improve the administration of the advancing futures program in the past?

Thanks.

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. As mentioned previously, advancing futures is the only program of its kind in Canada, and as more and more young people apply and are accepted, we endeavour to make sure that they are well supported.

In my previous answer, I did speak to the benefits of the program and its long-term impact on the lives of those enrolled. This is why we’ve seen an increase in the number of recipients. We continuously engage our caseworkers to ensure they are advocating this program to those who are eligible for it. In fiscal year ’19-20 the program added additional staffing due to this increase in the number of recipients, and with additional supports the program was able to assist more students with achieving their educational goals. Young adults are more successful because our program co-ordinators provide a high level of social and emotional support to students along with consistent liaison with the educational institution.

Mr. Walker: Thank you very much for that. It’s wonderful to see that the program here, advancing futures, Deputy Minister, is broad-based and flexible enough whereby we’re seeing the supports getting to the students as measured here in the 2019-2020 report.

Now, Deputy Minister, in the time I have remaining, I want to focus on the red tape reduction aspects of the 2019-2020 report. We’ll begin on page 10 of the annual report, which discusses, as you know, some of the red tape reduction efforts undertaken by the ministry. It states that in 2019-2020 “Children’s Services identified 10,079 regulatory requirements” and that the red tape reduction initiatives “reduced regulatory requirements by 8.2 per cent.” That’s wonderful. My first question is: how did the ministry identify which regulatory requirements to reduce while still maintaining the safety and well-being of children and youth?

Thanks.

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. Children’s Services is continually looking for ways to reduce regulatory and administrative requirements in order to improve services for children, youth, and families while, at the same time, maintaining that focus on safety and well-being for those we serve. In ’19-20 we inventoried all of the regulatory requirements within our legislative regulations, policies, guidelines, and in forms in order to get the baseline count of 10,079 regulatory requirements. We then looked for ways to reduce the regulatory requirements, and we also looked

to reduce administrative burden and make it easier for people to interact with government such as moving to online tools.

Albertans also submitted ideas to the government of Alberta's cut red tape website, and we assessed every idea submitted to the department in order to find ways to create efficiencies so that efforts of child care providers and staff could be directed to children and families and not on more paperwork.

Mr. Walker: Thank you very much. Sticking with efficiencies that you mentioned, what sort of savings or efficiencies, Deputy Minister, did the ministry see in 2019-2020 as a result of the reduction of these regulatory burdens?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for the question. The new online child care application process eliminated paper submissions and reduced e-mails and phone calls, gave Albertans instant access to the information forms they needed, and allowed government staff to be more efficient, all of which ultimately saves taxpayers' dollars and allows our staff to work more closely with families and children. This change saved taxpayers approximately \$1.2 million per year. In addition, streamlining this process allows child care staff to focus on supporting the children and families instead of focusing on that paperwork. We also continued to use and broaden the use of case connect, which is a mobile application that reduces data entry and duplication, enabling caseworkers to enter case notes in the field while providing up-to-date, accessible electronic information critical for decision-making.

We also moved to a three-year funding model for the child advocacy centres from an annual granting process. This change allowed the centres to focus on delivering programs and services instead of grant application administration. Children's Services also committed to consolidating early intervention and prevention grants to fill gaps in the system, provide consistency across the province, and to make it easier for families to navigate the system to find the support they need.

Mr. Walker: Thank you so much for that thorough answer. We're running out of time here, so I would just say that this has been very enlightening for me. I thank you for your time, and there's just nothing more important . . .

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member.

I will now move over to the Official Opposition for their next block of time. Thank you.

9:00

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Deputy, I was listening with interest. Of course, as referenced on page 40 of the annual report: "A Social Return on Investment and an Economic Impact Assessment completed" for the advancing futures program. I agree that the advancing futures program is quite important. Of course, we do know that a number of young people transitioning out of care are not in a position – we would hope that they would like to access postsecondary, but not every young person, particularly given some of their trauma histories and other challenges, may be able to see postsecondary as something they're going to seek out. So my question is – it's just a bit of a follow-up from our previous block. That same kind of social return on investment and economic impact assessment: was that done for the support and financial assistance agreements program?

Ms Wilson: As I said in my previous answer and as, I believe, ADM Reeves also indicated, there was analysis done to support that in looking at jurisdictional review and that we would endeavour to

provide any additional information in regard to economic analysis that was appropriate to share.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy.

Okay. I'm going to move on a little bit to COVID response. Of course, page 11 of the annual report discusses some of the responses in the early parts of the pandemic that were made by the Ministry of Children's Services. Page 11 references modifications that were made to the work of Children's Services staff to support the well-being of children, families, and staff. Can you clarify or tell this committee about what kinds of changes were made to the practice of caseworkers in the early part of that pandemic, in March 2020, in terms of – were in-person visits affected? And in-person assessments: were those still taking place?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. We certainly acted very quickly to mitigate the risks associated with the onset of the pandemic and to ensure the safety of both our staff and the children and families that we serve. In particular relation to staff, we did follow all public health guidelines set forth by the chief medical officer of health and ensured proper PPE was available. To lower the risk of spread, we temporarily closed our offices to the public. However, staff continued to work regular hours, with modification to address safety for all. We worked very closely with Alberta Health Services, the Ministry of Health, and our agency association to modify practice guidelines as required to ensure staff felt that they had what they needed to continue their practice. We also, as I mentioned in my previous responses, broadened our scope and use of case connect so that workers were able to . . .

Ms Pancholi: Sorry, Deputy. I don't mean to interrupt, but what I'm asking is whether in-person visits were continued between caseworkers and families to do visits and to do assessments. That was my question.

Ms Wilson: Yes. Thank you for that.

I'm going to ask ADM Wagner if she can provide detail on that question.

Ms Wagner: Good morning. Yes, visits continued and assessments continued throughout the pandemic, including those early days. We provided guidance to staff in terms of how to remain safe and how to keep the people they visited safe in terms of use of PPE and other measures prescribed by the chief medical officer of health. In many cases visits occurred, if necessary, virtually, using virtual technology offered by government, so visits continued throughout the pandemic.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Assistant Deputy Minister, but the question was whether in-person visits were taking place, and it sounds like they were not. What about assessments, in terms of when a report is made and an assessment is required of a child's circumstances to see whether or not it's safe. How were those conducted, and what was the decision made in March 2020 as to how those would be conducted?

Ms Wilson: My apologies. I was on mute. I'll ask ADM Wagner to respond to that as well.

Ms Wagner: I just want to correct the record that we continued to do in-person visits where it was safe to do so. We continued to do assessments, and those assessments continued to be done in person. There were times with home visits where perhaps one member of the family had COVID or where there were concerns about, you know, maintaining the medical officer of health's guidelines around

remaining safe, and in those instances virtual visits took place, but home visits continued and were our preferred approach to visiting.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

I'm not asking for any personal information here, but can you – I would imagine you track visits, whether or not they're in person or whether or not they're conducted virtually. That would probably be part of the notes of the caseworker. Can you provide information to this committee about what percentages of assessments and visits were being done virtually and what percentages were being done in person?

Ms Wilson: ADM Wagner.

Ms Wagner: You are correct that we collect that information. We do not have the ability to mine our case notes for that kind of information. We can examine if it's possible for us to provide that information using a reasonable amount of resources and provide it back to the committee, but it's not easily accessible data.

Ms Pancholi: Is the ministry tracking how many, then? It wasn't tracking how many visits were being done in person versus virtually, then? Wouldn't that be a concern? I'll clarify this a bit, ADM Wagner. We know, of course – and I know that the Minister of Children's Services identified this as well – that part of the concern in the early parts of the pandemic in particular was that children, vulnerable children, would not be around trusted adults like teachers, nurses, you know, all those other people, who are typically the ones who would be making reports, so in some respects in the early part of the pandemic vulnerable children were more vulnerable. They were isolated. There was stress, financial anxiety, of course. How did the ministry choose to take the heightened concern around the safety of children and measure that against how many in-person assessments and visits were taking place? Certainly, the need would be higher, so I'm wondering: how did the ministry address that?

Ms Wagner: That decision was made by the casework team in terms of determining: if a home visit was required, what would be the best approach to that visit? It was done on a case-by-case basis. If there was an emergency situation that required in-person visits, those visits would occur because our first job is to keep children safe. You know, if there was an assessment made that perhaps at this time the family was stable and a virtual visit would allow us just to assess that the family was stable, that would be done, but that was always done by the case team, and they would consider the circumstances and the individual situation of every family.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Was the ministry prepared? We do know that in the first quarter of that 2020 year, which would have been, you know, following the implications of the pandemic, intakes dropped 10 per cent, right? So were there any additional steps taken knowing that intakes dropped because kids were not in places where trusted adults could see them? Were additional measures taken, increased steps taken, to further help identify where children were vulnerable and need maybe more support?

Ms Wilson: I'll ask ADM Wagner to continue with her response.

Ms Wagner: During that time we continued to consult with our colleagues in Health and Education and with individual school boards and others to determine that, if there were concerns about children who were not perhaps attending school, online school, or

perhaps where their family doctor or others were concerned, we would follow up with those families.

Ms Pancholi: Did you get many reports of that nature?

Ms Wagner: I don't have that information at my fingertips at this point. We would have to examine our data to determine if we were collecting that and if there was a difference from the referrals coming forward.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you. I appreciate that.

Deputy, I'm going to move on a little bit to child care during the pandemic, because again, as we know, in March 2020 that's when child care programs were shut down. You mentioned the essential workers child care spaces, 3,400 essential child care spaces. Can you please advise this committee: how many of those spaces were actually filled, and how much overall was budgeted and spent on the essential service child care?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. On March 23 select licensed daycare and out-of-school care programs across the province began to reopen to provide that care for essential service workers, as mentioned, 3,400 spaces across eight communities. There was approximately a 4 per cent enrolment rate for that. About 153 students enrolled. That would have been in March 2020.

9:10

The Chair: Thank you.

I will now move on to the government side, please.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Chair. Deputy Minister, in the last set of questions you spoke about case connect. I'd like to ask a few questions on that. On page 10 of the annual report it identifies case connect as part of the ministry's red tape reduction efforts. Page 14 describes the purpose of case connect, which is a mobile app that allows "child intervention workers to enter case information on a laptop, tablet, or smart phone directly into the case management system." The annual report notes that this "improves the timeliness of record entry and increases accuracy by reducing transcription errors" and frees the caseworker's time up, obviously, to spend more time working with families and children. Can the department tell the committee what the impact of case connect was in the 2019-2020 year and how it affected where caseworkers were able to focus their time? Sorry; I was just going to add one more here. What sorts of measures in the ministry are you using to track the effectiveness of case connect?

Ms Wilson: Sorry about that. Thank you for the question. As I mentioned in my previous responses, case connect supports secure, timely, accurate, and accessible electronic information. Workers are able to get their contact logs entered more quickly so that this information is accessible to others in the province who may need to access the information, for example, after-hours services that may need access during the evenings, overnight, or on weekends.

Case connect reduces duplication of work and time spent entering those contact logs. Prior to the implementation of case connect, workers were either documenting contact logs on paper or in a Word document and then transcribing or copying the information into our electronic case management system once they returned to the office. Case connect allows immediate entry of contact logs into the electronic system regardless of where the caseworker is located, which reduces travel time and time spent on transcription of notes. This, in turn, frees workers up to spend more time with families and children.

Increased electronic entry results in reduced paper storage requirements as well. Case connect is one of our first steps in our pathway to paperless, which is an ongoing digital initiative.

Your second question was in regard to measures the ministry is using to track the effectiveness of case connect. We do that in a couple of ways. We look at the number of users of case connect, we look at the number of contact logs being added through case connect, and then we also look at feedback received from caseworkers concerning the impacts of the application.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Could you just elaborate a little bit on what feedback is being collected on case connect, you know, and how that feedback is being used to make the application even better?

Ms Wilson: Certainly. Thank you for that question. Feedback was and continues to be collected consistently through the pilot phases of the project and then during the phased-in implementation. Feedback continues to be provided informally through conversation and meetings with front-line staff, supervisors, and managers. Requests for changes to the application are reported to the support desk, and then they are logged as action areas to be explored for future development.

Thank you.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you, Deputy Minister.

My next question to you is on inclusive child care. On page 28 of the annual report key objective 2.2 is stated to be: “enhance and promote diversity in community-based child care services, including supports that are culturally inclusive and that support children with unique needs.” Page 29 details the Getting Ready for Inclusion Today program, which is meant to provide children with disabilities a chance of meaningful participation in their homes, communities, and schools through the ASAP – access, support, and participation – program. “In 2019-20, Children’s Services provided \$2.3 million to support 162 active Getting Ready for Inclusion Today programs.” Can the department outline the criteria used to determine funding for each of these programs?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. The GRIT program, Getting Ready for Inclusion Today, is a community organization that supports the meaningful participation of children in care programs through the evidence-based ASAP – or access, support, and participation – program. In ’19-20 the ministry provided \$2.3 million to GRIT to provide the access, support, and participation program to the 162 child care programs. That \$2.3 million was a combination of \$1.7 million of federal funding and \$600,000 of provincial funding.

Thank you.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Also, could you comment on: how is the department measuring the success of the Getting Ready for Inclusion Today program?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for the question. As outlined in the contract, GRIT – and I’ll maybe reference it as GRIT in this answer – is required to conduct pre- and postobservations to measure the increased capacity of child care programs to provide high-quality, responsive environments that intentionally teach social and emotional development and respond effectively to challenging behaviours. Once program educators reach mastery level, coaching supports shift to sustainability and are gradually removed.

Mastery level means achieving about a 75 per cent benchmark for inclusive practices that are implemented with all children in a classroom to ensure responsive relationships and high-quality

environments. Some examples of an inclusive practice are using visuals with all children to communicate the daily schedule and help children prepare for transitions, teaching friendship skills and how to express emotions in healthy ways, and age-appropriate problem solving. All staff in participating programs receive professional development, coaching, and training, but only one program educator per program, called the site lead, is observed and assessed for attainment of mastery level. The time frame to achieve the mastery level is about 18 months, and in ’19-20 some of the staff achieved the benchmark within 12 months.

Ms Armstrong-Homeniuk: Thank you.

Chair, at this time I’d like to cede my time to my colleague MLA Neudorf.

The Chair: Please proceed, Mr. Neudorf.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that.

Deputy, I’m going to be turning to page 16 of the report, talking a little bit about key objective 1.2, identified as supporting “children in care to develop long-term, nurturing relationships by increasing the connections to family, significant persons and Indigenous communities.” Under this objective on page 16 of the annual report it states: “The Assessment and Support for Kinship Caregiving (ASKC) Pilot was launched [in 2019] . . . to test and enhance the Kinship Care Assessment process and tool.” How is the department measuring success within this new pilot program?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. The department is currently reviewing the pilot program on a large variety of parameters, which would include surveys and direct feedback through interviews and ongoing participant meetings and training events. To date both caseworker and caregiver reactions to the program have been very positive. This includes elders indicating that the work is reconciliation and kinship caregivers indicating that the process has supported their own healing journey, making it easier for them to be caregivers to their own kin.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Can you go a little bit further into your surveys and direct feedback? Has that been hampered at all by the COVID-19 pandemic? Has that limited their ability to provide that feedback? Just wondering if they are living in circumstances where Internet connectivity is limited. As your other deputy was sharing earlier, it seems like the first response is to try to do in-person meetings. Have you been able to get full and robust feedback on that pilot program?

Ms Wilson: Well, certainly, I would say that the pandemic has slowed a number of things for us and likely many others, but I think that we are trying to do that pilot so that we can actually implement recommendations going forward in this fiscal year.

I will ask ADM Wagner if she has any further detail that she can add to that piece.

Ms Wagner: No. Not at this time.

Mr. Neudorf: All right. Thank you. To both of you, I appreciate that.

I definitely appreciate that the pandemic has made it much more difficult to reach different demographics, but it does sound like the efforts are still ongoing. I do appreciate your comments on elders providing direct feedback that it is culturally appropriate, that it is working towards the goals of reconciliation. I think those are very, very helpful, and I do commend you and the department for working on implementing at least three of the four

recommendations by the Auditor General, specifically the ones related to First Nations.

Thank you.

9:20

The Chair: Thank you.

Thank you, government side.

We'll move things over to the opposition side, please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. Deputy, I just want to follow up on the questions we were discussing just before we ran out of time, about the essential services child care that was provided, and I just want to clarify. So 3,400 spaces were available. Can I clarify? Was it 153 spaces that were actually filled, so a 4 per cent enrolment rate? Is that correct?

Ms Wilson: That's correct. Between March 23 and March 30.

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Did that enrolment increase after that time?

Ms Wilson: Yes. For the period of the re-entry or reopening, which occurred between March 23 and into May. By the end of May we would have seen about 4,000 spaces opened and the attendance rate about 28 per cent.

Ms Pancholi: Twenty-eight per cent.

Can you again just indicate how much was spent on the essential services? Of course, I understand from the annual report that the ministry was compensating child care providers for unfilled spaces. What was spent overall on the essential services child care?

Ms Wilson: In the '19-20 budget there was no specific funding provided to child care. However, into April we did support child care in that reopening and provided, as you noted, approximately \$4.7 million that supported child care programs to open to essential workers.

Ms Pancholi: Does that include the \$500 PPE that was mentioned, or is that just for the unfilled spaces?

Ms Wilson: That includes the one-time \$500 payment to cover off the necessary cleaning supplies as well as support for unused spaces.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy.

Why, in your mind – that is a relatively low enrolment rate. Do you have any thoughts as to why the uptake on the essential services child care was quite low?

Ms Wilson: I'm sorry; I don't have any information that I could share on that one.

Ms Pancholi: Did the department not analyze as to why the enrolment – I mean, it spent quite a bit of money. It opened up a lot of spots. Did it not assess how that money was used and whether or not the uptake was good?

Ms Wilson: Certainly, our focus was on making sure that there were spaces available.

However, I will ask ADM Craig if she has any detail that she could provide on that.

Ms Craig: Thank you. I appreciate the question. Can you repeat that for me just so that I make sure I'm answering the right thing?

Ms Pancholi: Yeah. I just wanted to clarify as to why you believed or the ministry believed the enrolment was low for the essential

services child care and what, I guess, actions were taken to encourage more enrolment or higher enrolment in the essential services child care.

Ms Craig: Thank you for that. Certainly, during that time, as everybody will recognize, it was an extremely dynamic and fluid time for all sorts of workplaces, including child care. I think that that dynamic environment in all workplaces meant that a lot of families were at home. They were schooling at home. They were working at home. There was a lot of concern about being in places together with potential exposures to COVID. Those are a few of the reasons that we have heard from stakeholders and parents. But, again, there's a very wide range of potential reasons, and all of those would play into that.

Ms Pancholi: Did the ministry at all think – I'm not sure what the categorization was as to who was eligible for that essential services child care. At any point was a discussion had about expanding who might be eligible for it?

Ms Wilson: I'll ask ADM Craig to provide you with the information on who was eligible.

Ms Craig: Thank you. The essential services initially were identified through the Ministry of Health, and those conversations with the Ministry of Health were ongoing in close collaboration with the chief medical officer of health throughout the reopening. As you will recall, as I mentioned, it was a very dynamic time, so it very much started with the health care workers, for example, and first responders.

In addition to that, to speak to your point in terms of how did we make people aware, we sent letters to employers to raise awareness. We also posted information on child care programs online to try and encourage that use. Again, it was a very dynamic time, with a lot of families experiencing a lot of concerns, so they ended up staying home for a variety of reasons.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, ADM.

I'm going to move on to page 26 of the annual report, which discusses the end of the stay-at-home and kin care child care subsidies. Can the deputy advise this committee as to: how much did that save the ministry? Those actually ended on January 1, 2020. Can you advise as to how much those two subsidy changes saved the ministry?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. As you know, the kin child care – sorry; I'm getting an echo. The kin child care and the stay-at-home subsidy amounted to in-year savings of approximately \$5.3 million as they both ended in January 2020.

Ms Pancholi: How many families were affected by the end of the kin care subsidy?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for the question. In December 2019 there were approximately 2,900 families receiving the kin child care funding, or 6,000 children. For the stay-at-home subsidy, there were approximately – sorry; I'm just searching for that number – 501 families, or 544 children.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy.

I note from page 32 of the annual report that as a result of the end of the stay-at-home subsidy, the annual report indicates there's no longer data on the number of children enrolled in preschool. Basically – and you've given us that there were probably about 544 children – the ministry is just simply no longer tracking the

involvement of about 540 children in the early learning system. Is that correct?

Ms Wilson: I will ask ADM Craig if she can provide information to that.

Ms Craig: Thank you. I welcome the opportunity to respond. Indeed, we continue to have ongoing contact with our preschool programs through a variety of means even if they aren't specifically in the data system, as you've mentioned. In addition to that, of course, all of those families are eligible for the subsidy program, and some of them may have moved on that. Again, as I noted, it was a very dynamic time, so we haven't tracked exactly which ones have moved where, but certainly we continue to have contact with those families through other avenues.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Just to be clear, I mean, the change came into effect on January 1, 2020 – so this was before the pandemic hit, right? – the end of the kin care and the stay-at-home. Now, I guess: what data does the ministry track as to how many children are accessing preschool? What data does the ministry have on how many parents are using either kin care or a family member for child care purposes? Does the ministry have any information on that?

Ms Wilson: Perhaps I will provide an answer on that. We, of course, track licensed and approved day care facilities or child care facilities. We really focus on regulating and tracking those that are in the licensed and approved system. We do not have a means to track those who choose to use the unlicensed care sector.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Deputy.

So there's no information as to how many families there are accessing – the ministry has no information as to how many families are using unlicensed care. Does the ministry have any information as to how many unlicensed care providers there are?

Ms Wilson: That information would not be available to us. Again, we regulate and support the licensed and approved system, so we would have information in regard to those statistics, but we do not track information about unlicensed care.

Ms Pancholi: Given that one of the outcomes of the ministry is to provide affordable child care – to increase affordability of child care, I should say, is one of the outcomes – can the ministry tell me how it tracks affordability of child care? Does it do a fee survey? Does it keep track of the average cost of child care in various communities by region or municipality? Does the ministry track child care fees?

Ms Wilson: Once again I'm going to ask ADM Craig if she can provide that level of detail.

Ms Craig: Thank you. I appreciate the question. Can you please repeat that for me one more time?

Ms Pancholi: I was asking whether the ministry tracks child care fees by municipality or region or keeps track of, basically, the cost of child care across the province.

Ms Craig: Yes. We do have information on the cost of child care through a number of avenues. One example would be that in the unregulated sector, as noted, we don't have a lot of information in that sector because we don't regulate it. However, we certainly know that surveys done through – national surveys, for example, provide that information. In addition to that, we do have

information on program fees, which we can share if you are interested in that.

9:30

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I'd appreciate if you could table that information.

The Chair: Very good.

We'll now move over to the government side, please.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you, Chair. I appreciate that.

Just a little bit further on some of those questions that we were discussing last time, back to page 16 of the report and working with some of those indicators on the pilot project. Page 16 also states that this pilot incorporates indigenous world views. Can the department tell the committee how these world views were incorporated into that pilot?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. The Kinship Assessment Advisory Committee reviewed existing program processes and practices to identify improvements to better support kinship-placed children and families. The committee's particular focus was on supporting indigenous children and families. The committee is comprised of staff that are directly involved in kinship care from six delegated First Nations agencies, six of our regions, including two Métis settlements, as well as divisional representation from field operations, program policy, and practice development and adoption services.

The assessment and screening for the kinship caregivers pilot was grounded in ceremony and guided by elders. All the train-the-trainer events were cofacilitated by the elders. The ASKC, which is the short form for the kinship screening assessment, was also presented to the elders' wisdom circle, and their feedback was sought regarding the inclusion of the voice of the participating elders in the review. Also, the foundations of caregiver support training contained a specific module relating to intergenerational trauma, indigenous history in Canada, and ways of being, and caregivers and staff both received foundations of caregiver support training. The development of the ASKC training curriculum includes an expectation that community elders cofacilitate the training with Children's Services staff. The holistic perspectives of the medicine wheel were included, as were indigenous child-rearing and caregiving practices. These were incorporated into the tools and practices within the ASKC. It is a holistic, community-based approach moving beyond the sole goal of finding placement.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you for that answer.

Now, just again tying that back to the recommendations from the Auditor General's review, the first three recommendations all speak to that indigenous outreach and incorporation. Recommendation 1 was to enhance the early support services and the processes to include the needs of indigenous children. The second one is to ensure that the care plan for each indigenous child requiring intervention services is adhered to. The third one is just to strengthen the intercultural understanding. Obviously, this pilot program would seek to, in my opinion, advance all three of those, but could you speak a little bit further on how this pilot would reach and implement those recommendations from your perspective?

Ms Wilson: You're actually speaking more specifically to recommendation 4 of the Auditor General report, around strengthening that intercultural understanding? Did I interpret that correctly?

Mr. Neudorf: Sure. In the list I have from their summary, the first three are the ones that were ready to be implemented: enhance early support services, ensure a child-centred approach, and strengthen intercultural understanding. I was just wondering how this pilot program was encompassing those recommendations.

Ms Wilson: Well, certainly, we would view the kinship care pilot, well, kinship care generally speaking as being one of the components that we would use to ensure that cultural connectedness because placing kids in the kinship homes keeps them connected not only to family but to their culture. As it relates to strengthening the intercultural understanding, as per Auditor General recommendation 4, this certainly would be a big contributor to making that happen, but it's not the only piece. The pilot is not, obviously, the only contributor to making sure that we make those intercultural understandings.

Mr. Neudorf: Sure. What would some of those other avenues be that you were utilizing to follow through with those recommendations?

Ms Wilson: Sure. Maybe I'll speak first about the – I can give a little bit more information about the intercultural understanding component, and I can address some of the others, if you'd like, following that. More specifically, recommendation 4 of the Auditor General recommended that the department continue to enhance its staff training of the history and culture of indigenous peoples as well as training on intercultural understanding.

Since that time, we have made great progress in enhancing indigenous cultural understanding throughout the ministry, including releasing the Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework in June 2018, which we continued to implement and enhance throughout 2019. It identifies mandatory training for Children's Services staff to better equip them with the knowledge, skills, and understanding to improve engagement with families served. The framework helps Children's Services deliver and develop culturally appropriate programs, services, and supports and build a workforce that is able to develop and maintain respectful relationships with indigenous children, families, and communities. Now, since we released the Indigenous Cultural Understanding Framework, we have redesigned the indigenous module in our child intervention practitioner training as well and developed further training in collaboration with indigenous communities.

I can share with you that as of March 31, 2020, about 80 per cent of Children's Services staff had fulfilled the expectations of the first foundations pathway of the cultural understanding framework and that an additional 20 per cent of Children's Services staff have taken more advanced and intensive training led by elders and knowledge keepers. I can also share with you that the ministry hosts an indigenous speaker series, which is an indigenous knowledge-sharing opportunity for Children's Services staff to gain insight and understanding of indigenous world views and ways of knowing, doing, and being. We held four indigenous speaker series in '18-19, with a total of 454 participants, and we continue to offer that series.

The last thing that maybe I'll highlight is that we also rely on the advice of an elders wisdom circle to provide advice to staff on policy and practice matters, that we are continuously strengthening our approach to providing services.

Thank you.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you. I appreciate that. That helps round that out.

That actually flows into the next set of questions that I'd like to proceed with. On page 42 of the annual report, under key objective 3.4 it is stated to be:

Collaborate with Indigenous communities, leaders and partners to strengthen relationships and develop strategies to support Indigenous children, youth and families while ensuring all staff and service delivery partners have enhanced Indigenous cultural awareness.

Under this objective, on page 43 of the annual report it outlines the miyo resource, which discusses foundational beliefs and approaches of indigenous peoples – so I guess this would be a very strong tie-in with this key objective as well – to promote well-being and resiliency and outlines an evaluative process that honours an indigenous world view. Again, this resource supports provincial implementation of the well-being and resiliency framework. My question is: at this point, transitioning into that, can the department explain for the committee if at all this approach deviates from the current practice and what this framework is proposing for delivery staff and agency partners?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. The miyo resource provides indigenous organizations and indigenous-serving organizations the opportunity to submit programming reports from within an indigenous world view, which is a shift in our current practices that utilize a western-based approach to reporting. Further knowledge mobilization around this resource will begin with delivery staff and agency partners to ensure that more programs have access to the resource, and as the resource becomes mobilized across Alberta, the hope is that indigenous organizations and indigenous-serving organizations will have an evaluation resource which is reflective of indigenous teachings on child, family, and community well-being and that this will also be reflected in the organization's practice and program reporting.

Thank you.

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you for that.

The annual report states that the miyo resource was being piloted by six of the 19 early intervention in First Nations communities grant recipients in treaties 6, 7, and 8 in 2019-2020. What sort of indicators were used to measure success within this pilot, and how is this data used? Maybe if you can round that out and talk a little bit about how else we could implement that, whether it would be implemented further with additional First Nations communities.

9:40

Ms Wilson: Thank you for the question. The miyo resource pilot and the EI grant recipients have come to an end, and communities who participated continue to use the miyo evaluation framework for reporting purposes. Due to the high turnover in staff who support the EI grant administration . . .

Mr. Neudorf: Thank you.

The Chair: Thanks.

We'll move on for our final block, please.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair, and to the deputy, thank you. I just want to confirm that at the end of the last block ADM Craig, I believe, committed to tabling the information that the ministry has with respect to program fees for child care, and I just want to confirm that that will be tabled with this committee.

Ms Wilson: That is correct.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you very much.

Okay. I want to just move on and touch a little bit on what Member Neudorf was just talking about. As you know, in 2018 the A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow action plan came out as a result of the recommendations from the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention.

That action plan contained a significant number of actions, not recommendations but actions, that the ministry would take in both the short term and long term. Immediate ones were completed in 2018-19. There are a number of those actions that were specifically indicated to be completed by 2020, so I'm wondering why the annual report – this is key work that I believe is also to meet the recommendations of the Auditor General. Are these actions under the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention's A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow plan still being worked on, completed? Why is that work not reflected in the annual report?

I believe you're on mute.

Ms Wilson: Apologies.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Ms Wilson: Acting ADM Joni Brodziak to respond with some detail on that.

Ms Brodziak: Hi. Thanks for the question. The all-party committee on child intervention – the 26 recommendations that were rendered to government by that committee contemplated long-term, measured, sustained improvements to the system. I can let you know that of the 26 recommendations that were rendered, 25 of them are either completed, in progress, or under way and that the ministry continues to move forward on system improvements built into ongoing operational improvements, sequenced out in a way that's sustainable, notable change.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, ADM.

To clarify – sorry; I've got a bit of an echo in the room here – is the ministry still following the A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow plan? Is it still implementing that action plan in the A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow document?

Ms Wilson: Perhaps I can jump in on that one just to say that Children's Services continues to drive policy and practice improvements as part of our ongoing operations, as ADM Brodziak said, and in line with the recommendations made by the all-party committee. The specific actions undertaken to satisfy the key recommendations from the panel are determined based on how they align with ongoing operational priorities.

Ms Pancholi: Sorry. That didn't quite answer my question, because A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow set out timelines for implementing those recommendations that the government accepted from the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention. Is the ministry still committed to completing the work set out in the A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow report, and what work was completed in 2019-20 which was clearly outlined in that report? There are certain actions, about nine recommendations, that needed to be completed in that fiscal year. Is it still following that plan from the A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow report?

Ms Wilson: I'll ask ADM Brodziak to provide detail.

Ms Brodziak: The A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow report did outline actions, but they were all connected directly to the recommendations of the all-party committee and were parcelled out in short, medium, and long term, as were the recommendations themselves. What I can say is that work continues on the all-party recommendations that satisfies the overall intent of those recommendations, using a measured approach built on current context and utilizing existing operational capacity to manage change, well aware that there are some recommendations that actually are not due to be completed till 2022.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you for that clarification. So you're still following the timelines, though, set out in both the all-party recommendations as well as in A Stronger, Safer Tomorrow? There were a number of things which were to be completed by 2020, which would have been in the fiscal year which is the subject of this committee's consideration today. You know, I can go through those. If you can then provide a detailed report as to how those specific actions that were supposed to be done by 2020 have been – what work was completed in 2019-20. That would be appreciated. Can the deputy commit to that?

Ms Wilson: Perhaps I can provide for you specific activities that occurred in Children's Services which align with the ministerial panel recommendations that occurred in '19-20.

Ms Pancholi: Actually, Deputy, if you can – sorry; just in the interest of time, because we only have a few minutes left, can you table that? I'd like it to speak specifically to the nine short-term actions which were to be completed by 2020. I'm sure you have a list of all of those; I don't need to read them into the record. The nine specific actions: I would appreciate you tabling what work was done to meet those actions.

Ms Wilson: We will endeavour to provide information that we can share.
Thank you.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you. I appreciate that.

Only because we do have a short amount of time, can the deputy speak to what cost-benefit analysis was completed around the decision to cancel accreditation in the 2019-20 fiscal year? Page 27 of the annual report mentions "learnings from the accreditation program will be considered as part of the legislative review." But the cancellation of accreditation, again, is not specifically mentioned in the annual report. Was a cost-benefit analysis completed in that year before the decision to cancel accreditation?

Ms Wilson: Just one second; I'm just accessing my information.
Sorry. If you can just repeat the question.

Ms Pancholi: I'm just asking if you can table any – was a cost-benefit analysis done on the decision to cancel accreditation in the 2019-20 year? That's for child care.

Ms Wilson: Whether a cost-benefit analysis – I'm going to defer to ADM Craig and ask her if she can provide details.

Ms Craig: Thank you for that question. The usual policy development process was considered in providing advice to government. As you noted, that piece of work was completed during the '19-20 year and the program maintained as it was throughout '19-20.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, ADM. I would appreciate it if you could table any documents related to any cost-benefit analysis that was done.

Okay. I want to clarify, just read in some questions into the record now because we're running out of time. Earlier I asked – can I just get a commitment that the deputy will table a detailed breakdown of the in-year savings, not just by the line items that she provided to Member Walker but detailed as to which grants were cut and which discretionary programs were cut as a result of in-year savings in 2019-20?

Can the deputy also table any ongoing work related to the long-term action items in the Ministerial Panel on Child Intervention? We spoke about the short term. I'm asking that the deputy confirm

that she can table any work being done on the long-term action plan items as well. I'll just seek her confirmation on that.

Ms Wilson: We'll provide information that's appropriate to share, yes.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you.

Now I'm going to cede time to one of my colleagues to see if they have some questions to read in.

Ms Renaud: Thank you, Madam Chair. Just a quick question for the deputy minister. On page 28 of the annual report the ministry references a \$12.1 million investment into inclusive child care. If the deputy minister could commit to tabling information on the outcomes. How many – any of these outcomes: what are the measures for success? How many spots are available? How much was spent specifically on training of staff? I'm assuming that all of these spots are in accredited child care and early learning, and if not, if the ministry could clarify that.

Thank you.

Ms Wilson: I'm sorry. Just to clarify, you're reading that into the record and asking that we table information?

Ms Renaud: Correct.

Ms Wilson: I will endeavour to provide information that's appropriate to share, yes.

Ms Renaud: Thank you.

That's all for me, Madam Chair.

Ms Pancholi: Madam Chair, did you have questions you wanted to read in as well?

The Chair: No.

9:50

Ms Pancholi: Okay. Thank you. I think we'll leave it at that, then, since we are running out of time.

Thank you to the deputy.

The Chair: I'll move things over to the government side now for your 10-minute block.

Ms Lovely: Thank you, Madam Chair. Deputy Minister, you were cut off when you were addressing a question for Member Neudorf, and I wonder if you had anything to add. I believe that he was asking what sort of indicators were used to measure success within the pilot and how the data was used.

Ms Wilson: Yes. Thank you for that, and I can certainly provide the rest of my response. Maybe I'll start just at the beginning if that's okay. The miyo resource pilot and the EI grant recipients, they've come to an end, and communities who participated continue using the evaluation. Due to high turnover in staff who support the grant administration for the First Nations communities, the department continues to socialize the resource and provide communities with the opportunity to utilize the program reporting templates.

In alignment with an evaluative process that honours an indigenous world view, the indicators were used in terms of meaning as opposed to measurement. During check-ins with grant recipients, they described their appreciation that the miyo reporting templates reflect indigenous ways of knowing and living, focused on the mental, emotional, physical, and spiritual dimensions of well-being. Grant recipients also expressed that the ability to report

based on all four dimensions was more reflective of their community-based practices, and the miyo program reports that were received by the department provided more descriptions of activities centred on how culture was incorporated into programming and the positive impact that it had on children, youth, and families who accessed the programming.

Thank you.

Ms Lovely: Thank you so much, Deputy Minister. On page 17 the annual report outlines the caregiver connections program, which "is a free peer support program for parents and caregivers caring for a loved one with a mental health concern, illness or addiction." Through the Canadian Mental Health Association of Alberta the program is provided "in six communities across the province." It states that "Children's Services provided \$245,000" to the CMHA to support this program. Does the ministry have any oversight in how this money is spent to ensure quality and effective programming?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. Funding is provided to the CMHA through a grant funding agreement, and standard grant monitoring procedures provide oversight of the program. The proposed budget is assessed during the grant application phase and monitored through reporting. Both financial and narrative reports, based on the budget and the program plan outlined in the grant agreement, are provided quarterly to assess the program, identify any challenges and opportunities, and identify any additional supports to ensure successful program delivery.

Ms Lovely: And what sort of measures are in place to ensure that the program is successful in providing support to caregivers, and how does this inform funding?

Ms Wilson: Thank you. As per the grant agreement the Canadian Mental Health Association provides quarterly financial and narrative reporting. Within the narrative report itself an evaluation plan with outputs and measures are identified and reported on to ensure the program is achieving intended outcomes. The information is then used as rationale when considering new grant agreements or renewals.

Thank you.

Ms Lovely: Thank you for the answer. On page 35 the annual report discusses improving access to mental health services for children, youth, and families involved with Children's Services and that the ministry provided approximately a million dollars in grants to community-based organizations to assist with this goal. Can the ministry tell the committee what sort of organizations were eligible for this grant funding and what criteria were used to determine which organizations received the funding?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. Organizations selected were service providers that already engaged with Children's Services and had the capacity and track record to provide access to trauma-informed mental health for families with Children's Services involvement. Some examples of the kinds of organizations that would have been included: the Boyle Street Community society, which enhances access to trauma-informed mental health services for high-risk and vulnerable youth involved in Children's Services, and the program supports youth through mental wellness screening and planning, transitional and outreach supports, connection to community resources, and support in addressing barriers and advocacy.

A second example would be the Edmonton Mennonite Centre for Newcomers, which enhances access to trauma-informed mental

health services for newcomer and immigrant children, youth, and families involved with or at risk of becoming involved with Children's Services, including access to mental health specialists for assessment and early intervention supports, support in addressing the multiple barriers experienced by multicultural families, and connections to additional supports in their community.

Maybe the last example that I would provide for you is the Multicultural Health Brokers program, which enhances access to trauma-informed mental health services for multicultural children, youth, and families involved with or at risk of becoming involved with Children's Services. It also includes access to mental health specialists for assessment and early intervention supports and support in addressing multiple barriers experienced by multicultural families.

Thank you.

Ms Lovely: Thank you for the answer, Deputy Minister.

Your annual report states that key objective 1.4 is: "work in partnership with community-based organizations and municipalities to combat child exploitation and domestic violence." On page 19 of the report it outlines the purpose of child advocacy centres being that they "provide a child-centred approach to abuse investigations and coordinated access to services." In 2019-2020 the ministry reviewed the partnerships and funding to child advocacy centres across the province, with the new funding model being announced in February 2020. Can the department outline how the review of these partnerships and funding model was structured?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for that question. Child advocacy centres have been developed by communities in Alberta over time, with a variety of partners coming together to solve community-specific issues. They have been funded through multiple mechanisms for different programming and functions, and this evolution of ground-up centres meant that government's role, responsibility, and accountability for service provision and funding had been unclear and inconsistent at times across the province.

In 2018 the government of Alberta publicly announced funding for the centres in seven geographic locations, mirroring the seven Children's Services and Community and Social Services regions that existed at the time. The south was considered one centre, but between 2016 and 2019 the centres experienced multiple interim grants and very little co-ordinated funding long term. In '19-20 fiscal year the government funding was moved from annual grants to three-year, multiyear grants and was split between Children's Services, Justice and Sol Gen, and Health to support them in longer term planning. Centres can also apply independently for grants on an ongoing basis and may receive funding from federal government, local entities, fundraising activities, and other in-kind contributions. For instance, some centres are directly connected to an existing sexual assault centre as well.

Ms Lovely: Thank you for the answer. Can the department tell the committee what this new funding model looks like?

Ms Wilson: Over the three-year grant period funding is gradually redistributed between centres to achieve a more equitable split. Previously . . .

The Chair: Deputy, I hesitate to interrupt, but we are at 9:58.

I'm just going to ask the clerk to pause the time, and I'll have to look to the floor to obtain unanimous consent to extend the meeting past 10 a.m. for the six minutes remaining in our time together today. I'm looking to the floor, and I will only ask one question. Do

the members give unanimous consent to extend the meeting past 10 o'clock? Any opposed? Okay.

Seeing none, please proceed, Deputy. Sorry about that.

Ms Wilson: Thank you, Chair. As I was saying, over the three-year grant period funding is gradually redistributed between centres to achieve a more equitable split. Previously Calgary was receiving 50 per cent more funding than Edmonton, which will now become approximately an 8 per cent difference. New and smaller agencies also received small increases in funding to remain viable, and the eight centres presently have a combined three-year grant total of about \$10 million. The three-year schedule seeks to achieve equitable distribution over the three-year term.

Thank you.

Ms Lovely: What sort of measures are in place to ensure that children and youth who are survivors of abuse are actually receiving the supports that they need?

Ms Wilson: Thank you for the question. Centres report regularly on their volume of referrals, client demographics, needs, services provided, activities, and outcomes. Child advocacy centres are in the process of developing and implementing their own provincial database that will allow them to capture more consistent and accurate data. The aggregate data collected will assist the centres in evaluation of their own services and measuring the outcomes for their clients.

Thank you.

10:00

Ms Lovely: I'd like to cede over to my next fellow member.

The Chair: I believe it's Member Guthrie.

Mr. Guthrie: Yes. Thank you. I think we're down to short order here on time, but if we could go to page 26 of the annual report, it discusses supporting effective child care subsidy and details the Alberta child care subsidy program, you know, which your report mentions has one of the highest eligible thresholds in Canada. In 2019-2020, in this report, the ministry provided a subsidy to 28,729 children, with 80 per cent receiving the full subsidy.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member. There is a three-minute read-in period for your question as well.

Now turning to the Official Opposition side, you have three minutes to read in any questions that you may want a written response for. Just to let the ministry know, we would like those responses within 30 days, for any written response.

Please go ahead, hon. members.

Ms Pancholi: Thank you, Madam Chair. I'll just read some additional questions into the record. Can the deputy advise, as a result of the changes that were made to subsidy, how many parents in the middle class lost their subsidy as a result of the changes and how much money they lost per parent subsidy? As well, with the change to the Alberta child and family benefit, how many parents lost the child benefit in the upper end of the range, and how much money did they lose? I understand, of course, that there was an increase in the amount to the lower end; however, a number of parents, as a result of eligibility changes, were no longer eligible for that benefit.

The annual report references an inclusive child care policy that was to be tabled and released publicly, but it has not been. Can the ministry advise us as to the status of that inclusive child care policy as well as provide a detailed breakdown, again, of the \$12.1 million,

I believe it is, in the annual report that was spent on inclusive child care in the 2019-20 year?

Can the ministry advise what it knows about how many children on subsidy might have also been eligible for PUF and how many of them would have lost PUF for their kindergarten year or RCSD, which is the regional collaborative service delivery – I think I got that right – funding through Alberta Education? Does the ministry work with those ministries to realize how many parents would have lost those supports?

Does the inclusive child care policy and plan take into account that there are roughly about 3,500 children currently waiting for FSCD, family support for children with disabilities, funding?

Let me see if I have any other questions. With respect to the \$25-per-day child care program, beyond the evaluation that was done in that year, can the ministry actually table the detailed responses from the child care programs that led to that evaluation report that were in year 2 of the \$25-per-day program?

I believe that is all I have, Madam Chair.

The Chair: All right. We'll now turn to the government side for three minutes of reading questions into the record, please.

Mr. Guthrie: Yeah. I'm not going to go through that preamble again, but regarding the Alberta child care subsidy program, can the department explain what criteria is evaluated to determine whether a partial or full subsidy is given, and are there any additional requirements other than family earnings less than \$50,000 a year to receive this subsidy?

We may have something from MLA Walker.

Mr. Walker: Yes. Thank you, Deputy Chair and Chair. Just quickly, on page 29 of the annual report the ministry dedicates itself to cutting red tape by identifying key objective 2.3 as a "review of the Child Care Licensing Act with the intent of reducing red tape, supporting choice for parents, and maintaining focus on the safety and well-being of children." This review was stated as being scheduled to occur in 2020-21. Can the department outline what groundwork was done by the ministry in 2019-2020 for this review?

Those are all my questions for read-in, Chair. Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you. Are there any other hon. members for the read-in portion from the government side?

Seeing none, thank you very much. We will thank the officials from the Ministry of Children's Services for attending today and responding to our questions. We ask that our outstanding questions be responded to in writing within 30 days and forwarded to the committee clerk.

Moving on now to other business, hon. members, I just wish to advise you that I will be advising the members for a subcommittee meeting as soon as is practical for all involved, ideally on Friday,

as is customary for the subcommittee. I'd like the respective participants in this committee to provide some thoughts on the departments that we will call for May 25, June 1, June 8, and June 15 given the break in the Legislature's work and our extension of the sitting.

Specifically, I'm looking for a note from both caucus teams and also the AG team on priority departments that have outstanding recommendations for our consideration. If you could provide that information to the deputy chair and I such that we may deliberate upon it – in e-mail format is fine – before Friday, then we can work to bring a proposal to the next PAC meeting for our consideration. So by end of business on Thursday is the request there.

Is there any other business or items for discussion from the hon. members?

Mr. Guthrie: Sure. I'd make a comment to that. Just, I guess, first, we should recognize that the departments require at minimum about a month's notice before being called. It's just a standard practice from the committee and common courtesy as departments have a tremendous amount of preparation that's necessary to give fulsome responses. You know, this is in the best interest of the committee as well. Additionally, just due to the short notice here, I don't have, obviously, information in front of me, but I think it would be prudent to review sort of the time frames in which ministries have visited in the past, and we can just assess priorities from there.

Thank you.

The Chair: Thank you, hon. member. That information, a number of the answers to your questions are on the committee's internal website for the members' review. The historical schedule of when departments have come to the committee is on the committee's internal website, and prior to this sitting of the Legislature we were also in receipt of analysis from the LAO on a number of outstanding recommendations and a time frame from when we last saw various departments.

Seeing no other business, I will then move on to the date of the next meeting, which is May 18, 2021, with the Ministry of Community and Social Services.

I now advise that before we call for a motion to adjourn, please be reminded to remove your own bottles and cups for the safety of the LAO staff.

I'll now call for a motion to adjourn.

Mr. Rowswell: So moved.

The Chair: Okay. Thank you, Member Rowswell. All in favour? Are there any opposed? Thank you. That motion is now carried. We will see each other next week.

[The committee adjourned at 10:09 a.m.]

